

# *Sketch*

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## Succession

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Dana Woolley

I lower my drip torch over a patch of reed canary grass, careful to avoid stepping on a badger hole evacuated by its host. It's your typical fire-meets-fuel, fuel-ignites, and fire-burns-out-invasive-species. At least, that's my plan. I swipe at my forehead with the last clean part of my work gloves. The green plants sputter and hiss as the flame jumps to the next victims. I'm careful not to take any of this too personally. So long as I keep an eye on the fire, it won't jump beyond the first line. It's called safe black. The grass won't burn twice.

The remnant patch is enveloped in a thick cloud of grey smoke that smells like sulfur, mint, and a barbeque someone neglected. Mountain Mint was always my favorite plant as a child and bloomed every July. Remorse wells up in my throat for the bird nests, insects, native grasses here. They're all just collateral damage. Forbs and grasses take their final bow and lie down on the hard, blistered ground, unable to support their own weight. I hope deep down, under the canopy of reed canary, that there are still some partridge peas left. Their hard shells need fire to reestablish themselves.

This might be a case of too little, too late. If I had tried to burn last spring as soon as we got the deed to the land, maybe the invasive plants wouldn't have encroached this far. A lot can change over a year.

I remove my hardhat to scratch my scalp and the picture of Mark sporting a huge sombrero last Fourth of July falls out. I let the fire get close enough to singe a corner before I pick it up and put it back in its place.

When my great aunt died I inherited this land. Mark insisted we make it our home. He said my crazy spinster aunt owed us to make up for all the times we had to deliver groceries to her. I always hated the word spinster. At the edge of this remnant was a little shack that needed three new windows, electric wiring, and a fresh coat of paint when we first found it. It looked decent on the outside, but there were structural problems. Support beams housed termites and insulation was lacking in the walls. It wasn't a bad place, it was just a fixer upper. Mark loved a project.

I put enough water on the burn to let it cool and decide to do the same to myself. I take off my clothes without thinking as soon as I enter the shack, and tip toe

to the bathroom. Mark always teased me as I attempted a naked Arabesque across the living room after working outside.

“I forget how graceful you are when you’re covered in mud,” he’d said between kisses.

Before entering the shower I try to pli  , but my knees are stiff. Soot falls from my hair onto the floor. My shoulders and back ache from raking the burning grass. I lower myself into the bathtub, arms weak and covered in tiny cuts from sharp brambles. The warm water is always comforting to me, even when it’s over ninety degrees out. The steam opens my pores and mind. I haven’t yet gotten around to buying a proper bathtub faucet, but the garden hose Mark bought works just as well. The old faucet dripped constantly when Mark first tried to fix the problem. He got impatient and ended up taking a hammer to the faucet, missed, and hit the wall instead. I outline the crack in the tile with my finger and glance at the mirror where it always said ‘I love U’.

The liquid hand soap needs to be refilled, just like it had back in May and June. Bar soap is what I prefer. I had mistakenly filled the bottle with peppermint scented soap in February. A huge faux pa to Mark because peppermint was a December scent. He insisted my hands were the worst of any of his former girlfriends. If I had known better, I should have filled it with soap rich in aloe and cocoa butter, since the winter months make my skin dry and rough.

I unwrap another bar and leave the half empty bottle of pink peppermint soap as it is. Because you just never know.

The timer on the crock pot tells me my roast is done. I clip my hair into a bun and wrap a towel around myself to shut off the stove and let the meat stew in its own clear juices. A ladle would be handy, but my Northwestern alumni coffee mug works just fine. The wooden block that held Mark’s Italian knife set is empty. I don’t really care if my roast isn’t sliced with a filet knife, I’m the only one who will eat it tonight. I wonder how easy roast will be to eat with a plastic knife and spork.

I reach for our collection of paper plates in the cupboard. Easter bunnies and eggs, reindeer, turkeys, and birthday cake are my choices. Mark was so embarrassed that I hadn’t gotten 30th wedding anniversary plates for his parents. Apparently the 30th anniversary is a huge deal, and normal anniversary plates wouldn’t do. I guess I should have known better about that too. I pick the Easter plate for my roast, knowing full well it is the wrong holiday. The grass in the basket reminds me that I should be eating something green. Maybe tomorrow I’ll try that recipe for boiled nettles. Mark had said, “You’re not supposed to eat nettles. They give you a

rash! Imagine what that does to your insides. It can't be good for you." There are lots of plants that aren't supposed to be good for you, but people are drawn to them anyway. Like almond seeds, un-ripened elderberries, or dandelions.

The calendar on the wall has been neglected for two months. As much as I hate to turn over Krakatoa Island and stare at Mount Everest in our 12 Natural Wonders of the World Calendar, I know I need to get up to date. Mark used to put notes behind each new month. The April picture was The Grand Canyon. In Mark's handwriting it said "We should go here soon!". May was a starfish in the Great Barrier Reef with a thought bubble that said "Mi Corazon es tu Corazon". June had Niagara Falls, Dad's birthday on the 3rd, and on the 16th "Lunch with Insurance Lady - Take Mark's name off deed". Under Mount Everest on July 15th, "Mark's Dentist Appointment". I wonder if he'll remember? In the notes section I had written, "Watch for invasive plant growth in fall months - purple loosestrife, leafy spurge, multiflora rose. Burn Successful?"

I wonder if Mark made it out to The Grand Canyon yet.

I finally decide to take the plastic wrap off the windows and the smell of fresh rain, irises, and wet bark is almost too much. Suddenly I crave the safety of mold and mildew again. My work boots feel tight and uncomfortable compared to my winter pair. I'll get used to all this the more I go out in them. The ground is soft and my feet leave impressions. Usually I'd follow a trail that was already worn down, but this spring I get to choose. A fallen oak branch blocks my way into the remnant and roll it off to the side, exposing earthworms, sow bugs, and a tiny creeping tendril of partridge pea.

The badger has redug her hole in the earth and I'm careful not to approach too close or too fast. At this time of year she could have little ones in her den. Islands of blue tinted grass root systems perch high above the woody sprouts of forbs. I roll up my sleeves and pull out the dried reed canary stems from last summer and the ground willingly lets go. I crouch and dig my fingers into the soil below me to feel the beginning of spongy red and gold fungal communities.

Black ants navigate a pheromone trail left by their sisters. I place a twig in the middle of their single file line. The ants pause and their antennae twitch rapidly. They climb and stumble over each other in panic. Then one ant breaks through the confusion and crawls around the twig to reconnect their line. If they continue to follow that trail they can't get lost. It's biologically impossible.